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EGYPTIAN ORNAMENTATION.

WITH artistic surroundings, taught to reverence the majestic works of the great artists, encompassed by statues, monuments and busts whose dignity inspired respect no less than the workmanship excited admiration, the youth of Egypt grew into a lover of art, a producer of other works to arouse in their turn, not alone the praises of their contemporaries but the unmeasured wonder of generations. So was art incorporated in the public mind, thought, feeling and ambition that learned Egyptologists find its earliest productions to be the nearest perfection and their artistic skill seems ever to be upon the decline, for so free from fault must it have been in its conception that the human mind failed to retain the inspiration, and while this retrograding action had gone on for a thousand years before Ramses, it had served only to bring art during his lifetime to the level of human understanding and held it a model and an incentive to surrounding nations, many of them, in themselves, marked for refinement and taste.

The cause of this systematic decline has been a matter of speculation by scholars and thinkers; the civilization of the people at large appeared to suffer no parallel deterioration and the poetic reason of a divine origin for the arts can hardly be accepted as a satisfactory explanation. The early artists were certainly no more gifted than those who left monuments of later date, nor has their work exceeded in its durability; an argument aside from the failure of the natural talents of the man himself must be sought and modern investigators are disposed to attribute the fault to the blighting influence of the priests. The religious guides of the times prescribed a symbolic character to every ornament and from the temples of the gods was proclaimed the proper color for the artist's brush; bodies must bear the uniform shade dictated by these guardians of the soul, and draperies were toned after the laws set by the priestly horde, angles of the human frame were made by the outlines of the joiner's square, and perspective, incomprehensible to religious eyes, was indicated by placing distant figures above the heads of nearer ones.

In the beginning freedom was permitted to the designer's pencil, and scope was allowed his thoughts; he conceived an arch at Gournou and gave rein to his better passions by portraying upon the walls of Medinet Abou, the King tenderly parting from his Queen, the only known example of the finer feelings given us by Egyptian artists. But the arch was a menace to the spiritual grandeur of Osiris; while the pyramidal shape was indicative of holy things and led one to the admiration of Thoth and Hathor, so the arch was condemned and none but straight or converging lines admitted in the sculpture, the architecture or the painting of the country; the indication of human sensations was a hindrance to the practice of those which were godly, so cruelty alone was permitted to characterize human nature; the murder of prisoners was the virtue attributed to kings by tender priests, who looked upon the deeds as most congenial.

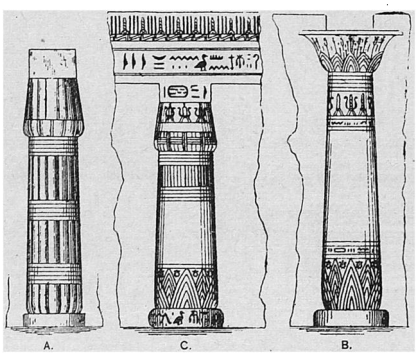
When to these heavenly admonitions is added the naturally superstitious character of the people, their veneration for all that appeared to come with an authority, their detestation of innovations, it is readily understood how their thoughts could have been controlled and their talents diverted into a special channel. It must be considered too that the priests were the most learned people of the time, they had mastered many of the sciences looked upon as the discoveries of to-day and had turned them to the strengthening of their power and the enrichment of their institutions. A worthy precedent to our electric light darted from the holy of holies in their temple, in answer to their prayers, and circled about the stone head of the great Osiris, while the crowds of worshippers threw themselves upon the ground and thought they had been in the veritable presence of their god.

Gloomy, sombre interiors are best adapted to influence the impressionable mind, and the ornamental arts may have been influenced somewhat by this knowledge of the architect. Discover all possible explanations for the cause the fact remains that Egyptian art was ever, within the historical period at least, in an apparent state of decline. However, though there may be reasons for deploring the circumstances that thus changed its nature and eventually so bound and fettered it as to discourage it entirely, there is a satisfaction in the knowledge that these same circumstances have given us a peculiar and distinctive form containing beauties fully compensating for those which it had lost.

The resources of the Egyptian decorator were almost unlimited in means and materials for such elaboration as was required. Walls were often made of polished marble from Hippo Regius, and at times inlaid with lapis-lazuli, malachite, crystals, jasper, blood stones, or agate; windows were closed with a golden network decorated with rock crystal in the form of stars and crescents and sufficiently fine to keep birds and insects from entering; mosaic pavement was not unusual and Thyia wood doors opened on porphyry stairs; emeralds from the mines of Tebel-Zebara were set about the window casings, and gold came in such quantities from Nubia that it was no small item in the outfit of an artist. Stone for exterior construction, the foundation ground of all the beauty of the interior, was from Chenum and Suan, or from the granite quarries of Syene. In short all resources were expected to contribute, and art was further encouraged and fostered by the publication of awards for improvements made in ornamentation; architects were permitted to aspire to the hand of the king's daughter, and one ruler so admired artistic work that he bound his own son to the apex of an obelisk to insure care on the part of the engineers in erecting it.

Standing at the pylon at the entrance to a temple, one saw through a row of gigantic columns, upon either side a straight passage to another gateway at the farther end; roofless was this immense hall excepting as caprice or the inclemency of the weather might prompt the use of an awning which was swung between the opposite walls; screens of very delicate workmanship and beautiful design stood at each column shielding the private apartments from the view of the processions taking their way frequently through this majestic road, bearing aloft high banners with sentences of adoration for their deities. These columns upon either side of the passage 'twas natural should be ornamental, and they received the first attention of the designer.

The scarcity of lumber in Egypt, and the inability in the beginning to use stone, prompted architects to construct with the help of the natural products. Reed, more strongly than anything else, urged its claim, and the quantities, so plentiful in growth, made it the staple material of the builder. Its slender proportions and little strength showed the necessity of binding a number together to serve as a column or a support. Thus when the employment of stone was made possible, this outline of the reeds was retained and the pillars were carved in three rounding sides repre-



senting the primitive material upon which they had so long been dependent. (A).

The bell-shaped top of the column probably originated in a later attempt to imitate the lotus, although the earliest capital of this character that has been found has the bell inverted from its present position, or naturally with the widest part at the bottom, which may sustain the theory of Wathen that it was intended merely as an ornament and finally placed differently because it thus appeared more graceful. (B).

A band about the columns bearing intaglio sculpture beautifully rounded up to the surface at the edges, and the capital made up of floral subjects, became in time a substitute for the plain reed column, the reedy appearance being entirely done away with finally, leaving the pillar smooth except for the numerous circles of intaglio work which wound about it, and told the history of the country in symbolic carving. The cornice directly over these columns was richly decorated with feathers, the emblem of sovereignty, and a winged globe the evidence of divinity. (C).

For exterior decoration the caryatic column was employed bearing upon half its face the figure of a god. Differing from the Greek caryatides, in that the figure did not support the upper portions of the building, but was made shorter, generally, than one half the height of the pillar.

Unlike, as it was, to the graceful outlines of the human form, Egyptian sculpture, in the portrayal of men or gods, possessed a dignity that impressed the people themselves and commanded a respect that the work of no other nation has called for. Grecian figures are admired for the genius, the perfection of the details and the feeling displayed in the least important of the simulated actions; but the countenances whilst they convey the semblance of the passions, depict anger, cruelty or remorse, while they picture the feelings of the ordinary man and reflect the common being, they do not possess that grand and awe-inspiring dignity that hushes one into admiration by its single virtue. The Grecian statue may excite rhapsodies for its art, arouse enthusiasm over its attitude true to life—there are a score of merits in the work that one may study, but with the Egyptian the positions are stereotyped and limited, yet the model chosen was one of nobility and a fitting accompaniment to the powerful face. It would be a presumptuous soul indeed that would aspire to a familiarity with a graven image of Osiris, whereas he might with no fear of indignant rebuke claim the attention of Jupiter, or even the patron goddess, Athène.

I have dwelt somewhat at length upon the sculptural art of Egypt for the reason that its influence upon other modes of decoration was considerable and showed itself in mural ornamentation in no slight degree, while very many figures, primarily adopted for the sculptor, were later appropriated by the painter, and found their way in a flat form into the colored adornment of the walls.

The various combinations of the lotus made agreeable designs, and its conventionalized outlines associated with other figures, became a means of ornamentation that was finally employed more than any other one form. In figure 1 is shown

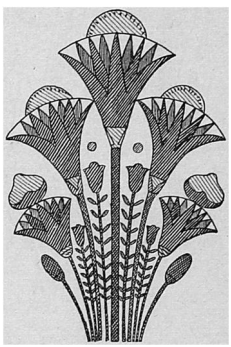
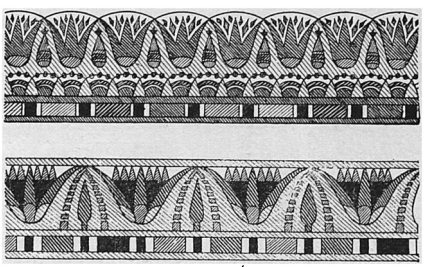


FIGURE 1.

simply the lotus flower conventionalized. The simplest combination of this plant was its introduction with a triangulated pattern, retaining the appearance of the illustration without any material alteration. No "misapplication or violation of a natural principle shocks our sensibilities; nor does any servile imitation of the thing itself destroy its consistency. A lotus in stone forming a graceful termination to a column, or painted on the walls as an offering to their gods, was never such an one as might be plucked, but it was an architectural one."

In the decoration of an entire ceiling, however, where the lotus extended over a large surface, it was necessarily made less perfect, and there were employed such means of adapting it to the decorator's needs as to anticipate an almost entire obliteration of its original appearance, gradually discarding one natural feature after another, changing its shape to fit the requirements of strictly decorative purposes, it evoluted from the beautiful flower that it was to a merely mechanical result with little, if any, remaining resemblance to nature. This disposition to depart from the graceful lines of the growing plant to the restrictions of the easel may be remarked in figure 2, and a step further in figure 3, both examples being taken from the Memnonium of Thebes.



FIGURES 2 AND 3.

When the priests interfered in the domain of art they left evidence of their intrusion, even in more marked characters than through the restrictions placed upon existing forms, or the changes made in the methods of ornament that did and had prevailed. Designs were made embodying characters belonging to the creeds of which the priests were representatives, and sermons were thus preached from the mute stone of the temples as readily understood by the multitude as the words from the Speaking Memnon.

This introduction of religious symbols (and symbolic characters of every description were then inseparable from religion) quite naturally gave increased facilities to the decorator, for regardless of the intrinsic appropriateness or beauty of the symbolic object, it was made to act its part in the prescribed plan. In this way the Scarabeus, or sacred beetle, was incorporated more or less extensively into decorative schemes and to give it the prominence which its holy significance demanded, associated figures were reduced to a secondary position. When the lotus was selected as an associate, it was artistically treated as had others previously been, and its individuality was still further merged into the surrounding ornament. The progress of this extinguishing principle and the introduction of the beetle is shown in figure 4,

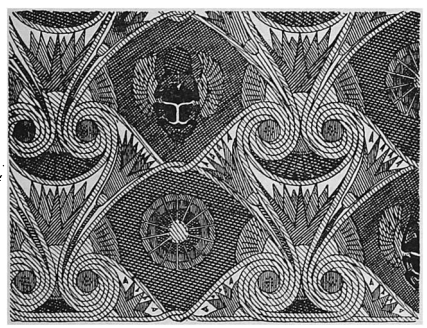


FIGURE 4.

a semi-ecclesiastical ceiling from the Temple of Edfou.

From this stage to that which indicates the final annihilation of the lotus design, is a very rapid transition, and we soon discover instances where the influence of the lotus takes the form rather of tradition and memory than actual presence. The border, figure 5, from the Temple at

FIGURE 5.

Denderah, is nearly extinction, while the next border, figure six, from the Island of Philæ, shows

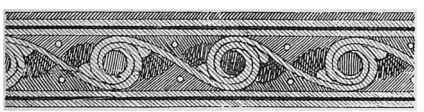


FIGURE 6.

a practical eradication of all the elements of a natural model.

In the mechanical process of painting ceilings it was customary to divide the surface into squares embracing the entire extent to be decorated; each square being then entrusted to a workman whose first duty it became to cover his space with a coating of lime or plaster upon which might be sketched in red or traced in black, the design selected. So fine was the wash finally used upon these finished decorations that it interfered in no way with the delicate carving which often formed a part of the scheme, while it served as a ground for the colors. The stuccoing and coloring extended to every part of the walls, ceiling and pillars other than those which were highly polished, such portions, the best authorities declare, being left in their otherwise natural condition.

This stucco was dry and the ornamentation put upon it was flat with no effort at shading or of simulated relief; fresco in its literal sense of painting upon wet plaster was an art unknown, so far as can be learned, to the Egyptians.

Many forms of mural or surface decoration familiar to modern artists, were employed on these early buildings. The diaper or all-over pattern, very reasonably and very properly, made its first appeal to good taste as an effective and a desirable suggestion for ornamenting large surfaces, and so we find in very many of the temples excellent examples of this particular scheme of adornment, many of them especially marked for neatness and symmetry. Such an one is the interlacing ring pattern partially shown in figure 7.

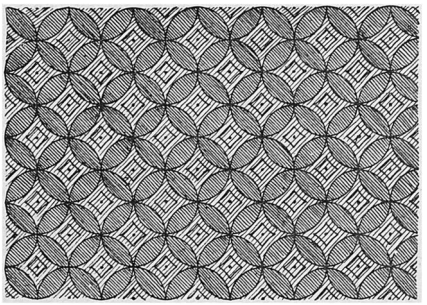


FIGURE 7.

Should figures enter into the designs they were carved by able sculptors and the appearance of relief increased by a heavy, glossy paint. It should be understood that this treatment of ornamental wall sculpturing did not produce a heavy effect, for it was a part of the education of an artist to draw his lines clearly and sharp, giving a lighter appearance and pleasanter result in general as associated with Egyptian coloring, than would the more natural curved and retreating lines so beautiful with the Greeks.

These sculptures in the age of Ramses III., were almost entirely intaglio, and it was not until many years later that this form was displaced, when in some of the richer instances the walls were tiled half way to the roof with white and violet earthenware relievos.

The suggestiveness of natural occurrences and the simplest or grandest event gave an opportunity to the Egyptian artist to introduce novel ideas and features in his decoration. The conventionalization of every subject artistically treated, served for a time to retain the first form taken on after the purely naturalistic was resigned. Gradually, however, as in those designs already shown, the strictly conventional became less distinctive, lost its resemblance, however foreign it may have been to the original, and acquired entirely new shapes and figures.

This absorption of natural incidents by decorative requirements is exemplified in a marked way in figure 8 from a tomb discovered by Belzoni.

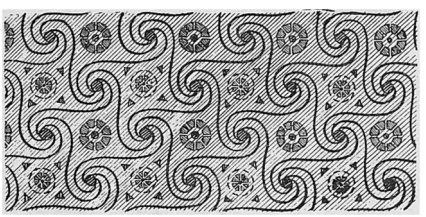


FIGURE 8.

The design shows a figure typical of the River Nile, the gracefully curved lines indicating the action on the surface of the water.

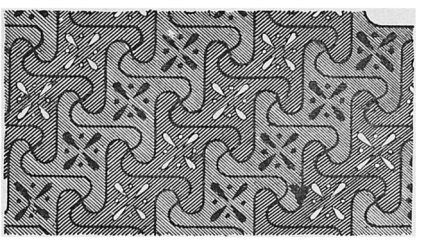


FIGURE 9.

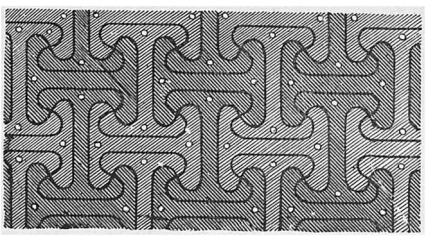


FIGURE 10.

The influence of this form may be readily traced through figures 9 and 10, where the combined irregular lines form peculiar and somewhat unpleasant seasick patterns, tempting one to follow their windings and with no result, for their beginning and their ending are indefinite and undefined. Another application of the wave pattern, made evidently before the design became debased, is indicated in the border number 11, taken from

FIGURE 11.

the Temple of Medinet Abou. The grace of these lines surpasses any other examples of this form and closely approaches realism.

The ornamental forms used by the Egyptians were symbolic, and certain characters and customs were arbitrary. A sentence over the entrance door to insure good luck, a winged globe, a large scarabeus, the sacred tor and flagellum, fans and flabella were introduced in regularly prescribed positions and the more artistic decoration, geometrical and scrolls, was worked in about them. So skillfully were these devices arranged, so intertwined were the lines forming them that the most pleasing combinations and often the most intricate in appearance were the result. The designs were extended over ceiling, cornices, and moldings, elaborated at times by embossed fret work painted, gilded, or inlaid with ivory, or, should the ceiling represent the heavens, illumined with countless stars.

With this geometrical character of decoration it can be understood that there was really but little composition in the forms, the ingenuity of the designer being taxed to compose new arrangements, not to produce original conceptions, and with the thought and talent turned exclusively in this channel, the work became as thoroughly distinctive and noticeable as did in later centuries the styles embodying highly elaborated details. Indian art is made up of similar combinations, and the possibilities of effects by such primitive means appear to be practically unlimited.

An instance of the charm possible in repetition is shown in figure 12, from the Temple of Isis, a

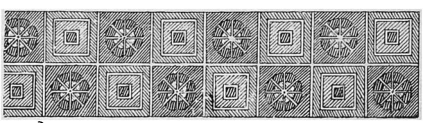


FIGURE 12.

plain and comparatively simple combination of squares and rosettes, most attractive and pleasing in covering large surfaces. A variation of this form with the slight addition of a border composed of geometrical lines without the dignity of any particular design, is found in the Temple of Latopolis and shown in figure 13. It has been

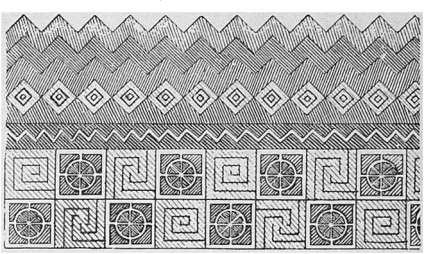


FIGURE 13.

observed that the diamond points and notches along the edge of this border were an outcome of the scroll patterns suggestive of the motion of water.

In the decoration of large surfaces the simple repetition of a geometrical form appears to have been preferred, although these forms were so commingled as to give them, in most instances, some semblance to the shapes prescribed by the priestly law.

Hieroglyphic writing, in its peculiar formation, was admirably adapted to ornamentation, and it is probably the earliest instance of the practical, homely necessities of a people being made to serve as an element in their art. Following the example thus set by the Egyptians, it became in time a custom with many nations, noticeably the Turkish, with the difference that in place of the all-over principle adopted by the Mohammedan artist in

the application of his alphabet to national designing, the Egyptian employed hieroglyphics as a separate and distinct feature, usually about the sculpturing at the upper and lower extremities of the walls, where it served as a border or as the decoration of the abacus over a column or pillar. One of the pillars, C, given at the beginning of this article, is a fair illustration of the manner in which the hieroglyphics were used.

As an evidence of advanced ability in fine ornamentation and artistic arrangement of details, a small border shown in figure 14 and found by

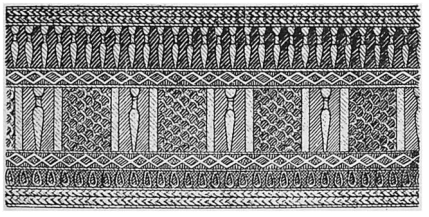


FIGURE 14.

Hamilton in the Grand Temple of Philæ, is an excellent example. It might be well to call attention to a design somewhat similar to this that Racinet gives as having been taken from a piece of jewelry—a bracelet.

A fresco from Medinet Abou opens an entirely

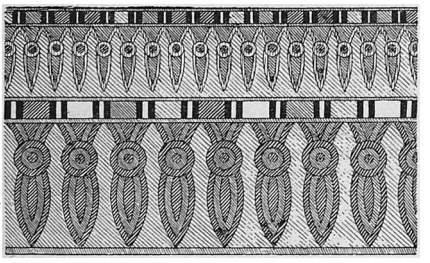


FIGURE 15.

new phase of decoration, an enlarged predecessor to the Grecian dentil. This is the simplest arrangement of the form, and though the outlines are of the least elaborate description it gives opportunities for very creditable combinations, as in its connections with the squares shown in figure 16 composing a handsome center and

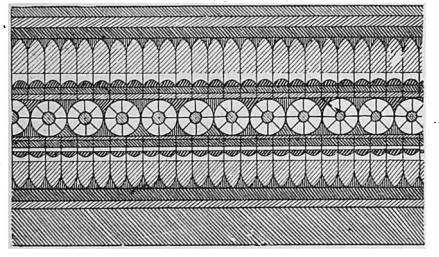


FIGURE 16.

border. Upon the inside margin of this border may be traced the influence of the primitive geometrical ornamentation shown in figure 13, and in the body of the border unmistakable evidences of the forms of figure 7.

The association of the early dentil and the rosette is shown in figure 17, from the temple of Hermopolis Magna.

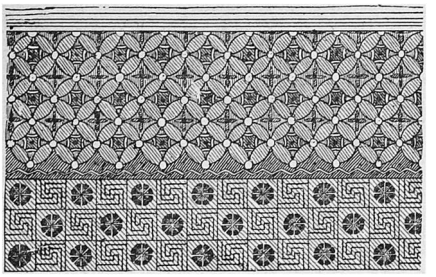


FIGURE 17.

The last figure, found further on in this article, is a wandering design caught without special reference to any historical interest but merely as an indication of the perfection attained by these people of an early civilization in the conception and disposition of minute and delicate details.

Earthy substances picked from common soil, powdered rocks, and clay, were left by prehistoric peoples a nucleus for Egyptian skill to develop into pigments and brilliant dyes. From such weak sources they formed yellow, red, blue, black, and green, and with these limited means they decorated their temples and their palaces, and for centuries made those wonderful mural works with no other colors at their command.

That these colors were effective may be realized from the study of the ruins of the various temples, even as they are to-day rent and almost destroyed by wars and time, tumbled into a mass of gigantic stones with here and there a roofless structure that has withstood its shocks, the limit of its single court giving shelter to an entire village of modern beggars who burrow under the dismantled greatness and find a refuge in the niche where once the high priest alone was permitted to enter. These unworthy descendents of early dynasties, with no thought of the grandeur that one day marked the very spot, gather with a spirit of avarice the gems of fresco still clinging to the fallen slabs and barter them with Europeans who build from the atom of richness a restoration of the ancient magnificence.

The Temple of Philæ thus restored shows the most brilliant coloring, in the midst of which are stars and animals and sacred birds, besides the proper and prescribed square, oblong, and circular ornamentation. The Temple of Latopolis has mysterious symbols representing secret rites in the religious ceremonies, as has also the Temple of Isis, at Denderah, and the other at Karnak, all finished in the most showy and ornate manner. At Hermopolis Magna the roof is composed of gigantic slabs covered with stucco and colored in red, yellow, and blue, and the Temple of Medinet Abou, the work of Rameses III., the outcome of this age of perfected art, shows more vivid mural decoration than any of the earlier or later edifices. Blue and red predominate, but are so skillfully contrasted as to take from them any suspicion of obtrusiveness.

Considering the magnitude and grandeur of the ruins it is not impossible to picture the true impressiveness of the scene when in their perfected state; these glorious interiors, magnified by the dignity of the architecture, were thrown open to the crowds of natives who, lining a pathway upon either side, stood breathlessly expectant of the coming of the king, and he, preceded by his staff bearers clothed in wrappings of gold brocade, the horoscopes and the scribes, the horses of his chariot covered with housing of silver, purple, and gold, entered through the rows of his subjects to do honor to the sacred ram whose embalmed body was within.

Fewer years have crumbled Roman works and destroyed the beauty of their decorations; wars, invasions, and despoilers have ruined the remains of Grecian art; the lion makes his haunt in the prostrate court of Heliopolis, and the site of Ninevah and Babylon are hidden by the soil of neglectful ages, but Egyptian labor was sturdier, and after the lapse of the centuries that have passed over the Pyramids and the Temples, there are found columns erect in their places, resting upon the foundations laid in the infancy of the world, showing carvings and sculpturing, which to imitate upon the same material would turn the edge of modern tools, and brilliant with the hues that are the same to-day, apparently, as they were when first laid on.

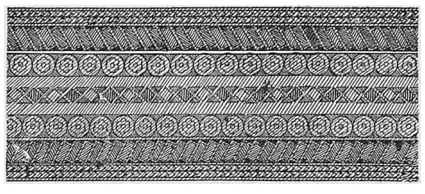


FIGURE 18.

Egyptian art commanded the intellectual strength of the ancient world, its influence exerted itself, not alone in its own center nor its own centuries, but it influenced the people of the eastern nations and possibly the artists of refined Atlantis; it gave a model to Assyrian designs, it laid the foundation for Grecian taste, the lost beauties of Ionia owed something to its teachings, and Chaldean remains show the touch of Pharaonic skill. Its character is more strongly defined than any other one style, it is indebted for its origin to nothing other than the fertile brains of its votaries, yet it was the starting point of the most distinguished orders, its *motifs* were of the simplest sort, and the formation of its ornaments was made up from the most ordinary patterns, a straight line served as the basis of a most elaborate scheme and a curved line was contorted into unlimited shapes, the egg-like compositions were contracted or enlarged, leaves were turned and grouped, the most unpromising stalk was made into a most acceptable support, and the familiar objects of everyday life were utilized to decorate and soften the surroundings.—A. C. B.

THE advancement of the times in matters artistic is shown among other things in the improvement in the character of our sign painting and advertising printing of the display order. Twenty years ago anything was good enough for a sign. As for theatrical printing it consisted in covering three sheets of paper with large and hideous letters, printed at most in a couple of crude and always preposterously inharmonious colors. Now theatrical printing produces more artistic results than the best lithography used for commercial purposes. Sign painting and making has become a fine art. Moreover the artistic signs and printing of to-day are scarcely more expensive than their ridiculous predecessors. Even the circus poster has evoluted into a well-balanced and effective pictorial composition, instead of the delirium tremens aggregation of stuffed brutes and reptiles which in the days of our fathers made the fences and dead walls blood curdling. More than one painter who now stands high in local artistic circles paid his studio rent and kept his color boxes full a couple of years ago by odd jobs in sign decoration, and clever but unknown men are doing the same work now. Among the artists who have contributed to the fine art of the theatrical poster are E. A. Abbey, C. S. Reinhart, Thure de Thulstrup, and W. H. Lippincott, with a number of others quite as eminent. In England such names as Hubert Herkomer and Frank Waller, R. Stacy Marks and Sir John Gilbert figure in the list of men of talent who have lent their pencils to the advertising interest. For a design for a soap poster, with life sized figures, Herkomer is said to have received £1,000.

IN the local artistic colony are some very rich and valuable collections of costume, arms, rugs, and antique furniture and bric-a-brac. The studio of William M. Chase is superbly appointed as his and his pupils' numerous pictures of it show. Another rich collection is that of the brothers Leon and Percy Moran. They possess some wonderfully costly and picturesque Japanese costumes and some delightful odds and ends of dress from the last century, along with an excellent collection of arms. A finer collection of arms still is that of Thure de Thulstrup, who also owns a superb cabinet of the time of Louis XIII. One of the most picturesque studios in the city is that of William H. Lippincott. He owns some noble woodwork in the way of carved cabinets of undoubted antiquity, some old tapestry very little of whose like is to be found outside the great studios of Paris, and a marvelous collection of rugs. The rooms of Sarony, the photographer, are a perfect museum of art treasures of all kinds, his ancient arms and Oriental bric-a-brac being especially strong. One of the noblest and least known studios in the city is that of Alfred Fredericks, in the Sherwood. The finest collections of pictures and sketches owned by any one of our artists are probably those of Messrs. Chase and Sarony, which include many specimens from famous hands. Among our landscape painters, R. C. Minor, who occupies a vast apartment in the University building, is undoubtedly the most magnificently housed. Mr. Minor's rugs and porcelains are particularly and deservedly famous.

THE development of the esthetic mania, so called, a mania by the way which, with all of its extravagances, has done a world of good for our art, has been a death blow to the trade of the theatrical photographer. The enormous trade in actors' and actresses' portraits, which made fortunes for the dealers some years ago, has vanished. Competition is so sharp and profit so light now that the photographers say there is no money in "publics," as they call them. They ascribe this principally to the advancement in the popular taste for interior decoration. Where formerly photographs with straw or splint frames were deemed sufficient decoration for a wall, plaques of porcelain and bronze, panels and pictures and the like are used. The photograph album is banished to the closet, and art books take its place upon the table. This is not only the case in the large cities but throughout the country. The export trade in photographs is said to be so nearly dead that it is not worth cultivating.